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ABSTRACT

Research bears out the assertion that the traditional tests and measures used to define achievement have incorporated societal attitudes about class, race, and gender. Cultural factors, teacher behaviors, and teacher bias can account for early differences in the reading achievement of girls and boys. Furthermore, girls' grades for English and mathematics decline as they age, while those for boys improve. Whites perform better than Blacks on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), although middle-class or affluent Blacks also do well. Organizations such as the National Center for Fair and Open Testing favor banning standardized tests before the third grade because of the inaccuracy of such tests. More equitable ways of measuring achievement are under review. (KM)

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CLASS, RACE AND GENDER IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

AUDREY WILLIAMS - CRA NOVEMBER 3, 1989

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CLASS, RACE AND GENDER IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

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Tests and measures of achievement are societal issues that are very much influenced by the status and roles prescribed by class, race, and gender. The traditional tests and measures used to define achievement have incorporated societal attitudes about class, race,and gender. This is borne out in a recent study conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). the AFT study reviewed five history texts that are read by more than three and a half million students, most of them in the 11th grade, and found many failings some of which included:

" - Military history is weak from the Civil War to Vietnam
- Labor unions and their connection to securing economic justice through peaceful means are overlooked.
- Political history and leadership have been shortchanged with an overemphasis on social history and a failure to integrate the role of women and minorities into the mainstream of history."(NY Teacher, 1989)

It is generally agreed that the school is the place where the social values, history and skills for participation in the larger society are learned. To some the school is a social regulator that assures that the classes and roles in society are maintained in the same proportions. The reproduction theorists go so far as to say that school is a mini-version of the larger society using class, race, and gender inequalities to maintain a division of labor. Using the reproduction argument as a frame of reference, we can see that schools tend to maintain the status quo rather than being agents of change.

Kelly and Nihlen (1982) discuss the impact of family in the patricarchial society where women regardless of class, race or wage status have the major responsibility for child rearing and household chores. Contemporary women contemplating full time careers in research, business or public service are constantly being given suggestions by the media about how to manage a career and a home. A number of women's magazines that are geared to the career woman regularly deal with issues of balancing work and family life. On the other hand marriage seems to be considered a plus for a career oriented male, much like a car marriage is a status symbol. The schools have to do more than academically prepare and encourage women to pursue non-traditional careers. Schools must also deal with the inequality of males and females beyond the work arena. Men and women should be able to share responsiblities for daily living and child rearing without feeling a loss of status or power.

In the same vein we cannot assume that because a youngster is

born into a poor family that poverty must be the youngster's lifetime burden. All too often schools in economically depressed areas warehouse children. In the Pulitzer prize winning book, Common Ground, the author J. Anthony Lukas elegantly traces the true life experiences of three families; two poor and one upper middle class. The students who attended the schools in the poor White and Black neighborhoods were educated in poor facilities, with mediocre teachers, and no hope for changing their condition or surpassing their parents.

The distinctions based on race are unfortunately part of the national fabric of American life. Our history as a nation shows instances where people who paid taxes were awarded inferior schools and materials while other citizens received a larger portion of the tax dollars for education based upon their race. Classic examples of this can be found in the histories of cities all over the United States. Racism was and is bad for everyone, both the victim and the victimizer. Racism and sexism worked hand in hand in the textbooks to give the impression that women and people of color were traditionally docile waiting hopefully to be saved by strong white male heroes. Social studies and history texts often paint the picture of slavery as being an idyllic time when African were taken care of by their white masters who treated the African well because the Africans were treasured as was all other chattel. We have to thank Dee Brown for his book Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, where he documents what really happened to the Native Americans who thought they were making an agreement with honorable men and soon found that their land was taken and their people massacred. Brown's book refutes all of the old cowboy movies of my generation and makes the notion of brave good European-Americans whose goodness and intelligence helped the uncivilized people just another lie. The history and social studies books only make a small reference to one or two women giving the impression that traditionally a woman stayed in her place. The readers and mathematics texts repeated the image of invisible minorities and women being only passive homemakers. There are contemporary efforts to correct the abuses of class, race and gender in the texts that school children use. The Congress on Racial Equality in Books has been working to improve the quality of books that are available for schools.

A Glance at the Literature

Gender and Standardized Tests

Cultural factors, teacher behaviors, and / or teacher bias account for early differences in the reading achievement of

girls and boys. (Yarborough and Johnson ,1980) Johnson (1972) examined the sex differences in reading in England, Nigeria, Canada and the United States. In England and Nigeria the boys significantly outscored the girls while the reverse was true for Canada and the United States. We can also look at the English and Nigerian societies to see how the culture has also probably accounted of these differences. In Nigeria and England the society is very male dominant and young ladies are to be seen and not heard. A woman in both societies is still strongly defined in terms of her relationship to males. Women in Canada and the United States on the other hand have made some progress in making people look at women as individuals rather than as the wife or daughter of Mr. So and so. Johnson states "sex differences in reading must be attributed primarily to cultural rather than to physiological determinants. (p.13)

Preston (1962) found that reading retardation was greater among boys than girls in the United States, while just the opposite was true in Germany. Preston suggests that the fact that the majority of teachers in Germany are male, may have something to do with girls showing higher incidence of reading retardation.

In the United States some researchers have found that there are teachers who treat girls differently and hold different expectations. For example, Sewald, Leinhard and Engle (1977) found identifiable teacher behaviors that affected student performance and were deferentially applied depending on the sex of the student and the subject being taught. For example, teachers directed more cognitive statements and questions to girls in reading than in math with the opposite being true for boys.

There have been many investigations of gender differences in mathematical achievement. Many (Armstrong 1980, Fennem and Carpenter, 1981, Marshall 1984) have suggested that at grade six and beyond, girls are somewhat superior to boys in arithmetic fundamentals such as computation.

Data from a 1980 national survey conducted for the United States Education Commission of thirteen year olds and high school seniors show a different picture from the earlier studies which gave boys the decided mathematical edge. The thirteen year old girls were nearly equal to the thirteen year old boys, but the girls averages on computation and spactial visualization were higher than those of the boys. By the end of high school (12th grade) the boys scored superior to the girls in problem solving scores, and girls had lost their earlier advantage in spatial visualization. (Armstrong, 1980)

Katheryn R Wentzel (1988) more recently reviewed the literature that shows that girls start out with superior grades in English and grades equal to boys in mathematics, when standardized test scores are studied. Girls because of the socialization process tend to get better classroom grades than boys. Through the socialization process girls learn to be pleasing to authority figures. As children mature from grades 6 through 12 we see the girls' mathematics scores decreasing and the boys' scores increasing. Wentzel used a small sample of 60 students (30 boys and 30 girls) whose grade 6 through grade 12 school records were analyzed. She found:

1. The study suggests that gender related patterns of performance differences in math and English achievement are related to specific outcome measures and change with age.

2. The correlational results suggest that behaving responsibly is related to female achievement in the classroom and on standardized tests, but on to classroom achievement for males. Theses findings are consistent with the literature which suggests that males and female students standardized testing and classroom evaluation afford the attainment of different goals for males and females.

3. The study also suggests that female and male classroom performance remains relatively stable throughout high school, whereas female standardized test scores decline in relation to male scores over this same period of time.

4. The decline of English standardized test scores has not been reported elsewhere in the literature , probably because female scores despite the decline, tend to be higher than males on standardized English tests.

Class, Race and Standardized Tests

Class and race are intimately connected in the arguments supporting the use of tests such as the SAT as predictors of college success. Approximately one third of the Black students who take the SAT tests score above the national mean while the remaining two thirds score below the national mean. Blacks have improved their mean group score by about fifty points over the past decade. We find that middle class and affluent Black students who attend good schools do well on the SAT tests. William Brazziel (1988) clearly describes the pros and cons of SAT scores for Black youngsters and notes that:

" ..One can no longer believe that minority youths are treated fairly in either the testing or the highly unflattering

press attending their performance. One can no longer ignore the advantages of rich over poor in the burgeoning coaching industry and in the virtual explosion of expensive computers and software designed to raise the SAT scores of the children of the well-to do."

Organizations such as the National Center for Fair and Open Testing are supporting the ban of standardized tests before the third grade. They cite the inabliity of current tests to accurately predict success particularly with very young children. Standardized tests; have afflicted the curriculum in districts where such tests are used to determine academic success and teaching effectiveness.

Students who come from environments that prepare students to do well on the SAT or other standardized tests generally succeed. The question raised by testing are many:

1. Do test like the SAT identify the best minds that the country has to offer or just the most affluent?

2. Can we continue to devote tax dollars to perpetuating the status quo?

3. How can we make changes in the testing programs that will be an improvement for all concerned?

4. Should women and minorities try to improve their scores on the tests or work for test reform?

There are also efforts being made to look at more equitable ways of measuring achievement so that a more realistic picture of the achievement and abilities can be reported and used for education planning. Today's speakers will give a more detailed description of the problem of how class, race and gender have affected testing and will make recommendations about what can be done for there to be an improvement.

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